

**MORE THAN A MIRACLE; LUKE 36-48; EASTER III/APRIL 19, 2015;
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It's a good thing Easter continues for several weeks after Jesus is raised from an empty tomb. It's a lot to process: a man being raised from death.

It's easier Easter Sunday to believe claims of resurrection from the pulpit and Bible when the place is filled to overflowing, choir soaring, timpani booming and the chancel filled with lush palms and bright lilies.

But here in week three of Eastertide, back from spring break and into our daily routines, the story of Jesus being raised from the tomb, from certified death comes with incredulous thoughts and lots of questions.

Mark Aquino preached a fine sermon last Sunday on just this point – that doubt and faith go hand in hand; doubt leading to greater, deeper faith; greater deeper faith relying on addressing the questions we bring to an empty tomb, not sweeping them under the rug.

One of the messages that come through all the Easter stories is how central scripture is to grasping the meaning of resurrection.

Stories like Thomas doubting in the upper room and today, the disciples thinking the resurrected Jesus is a ghost raise issues as fresh now as they were 2,000 years ago. The Bible doesn't just tell us Jesus was raised and then expect us to move on with this new information – it gives us these “teaching moments” as a reality check when the disciples were struggling, just as we struggle, with what it all means.

It is a tribute to this design that each of Jesus' resurrection appearances in Luke adds new depth and texture to his living presence among us. Last week the Missouri 'won't- believe-it-unless-I-see-it' skepticism of Thomas is met with the risen Christ standing before his doubting disciple, offering his side, hands and feet to touch, see and *verify the report* from the others that He is risen.

Or the story *preceding* today's account telling of two disciples on the road to Emmaus talking with a stranger who joins them on their journey and at the end of the trek stops with them for dinner where he recounts how the scriptures have been fulfilled in Jesus' life, death and resurrection; then upon breaking the bread at table with them he vanishes and the two realize the stranger was none other than the risen Christ—*not a memory* but a real living, breathing, talking, interacting human being.

Or today's story when those two on the road to Emmaus return in haste to Jerusalem to share with the others their experience of this amazing encounter with Christ. Even before they get the words out of their mouths he appears again and, says Luke, to their great terror and think he is a ghost. Here's the point: even though there were reports of his resurrection coming in from independent sources it was still too much to take in. So Jesus shows his hands and feet and requests broiled fish to eat *to dispel their fear that he is a spirit*.

All the normal human responses negating resurrection are met by the same resilient truth: the Jesus who is present *after* resurrection is as real as the flesh and blood Jesus everyone knew *before* the crucifixion. He is neither a fraud nor lie, nor ghost, nor merely a product of collective memory. This risen Christ who comes to interact with them is one and the same as the Jesus they followed through the hills of Galilee.

It's no wonder that the conundrum of resurrection confounds believers in every age.

Other religions have their hurdles too: Judaism's complete and perfect adherence to the law; Buddhism's complete and perfect detachment from all things material in this world; Islam's total devotion to Allah through a life directed by the teachings of Mohammed. There is as much debate and disagreement in those traditions over what faithful observance boils down to and looks like and how to achieve righteousness or nirvana or paradise as there is debate and disagreement in Christianity over resurrection and the new life it brings.

We go astray and lose sight of the life-giving perspective of Christian faith, however, when we become too focused on 'the how', the literal 'physics' of resurrection and not the what or why or consequence of resurrection.

The message of all of the resurrection appearances is this: Jesus who is raised and stands among his followers is the real Jesus – not a memory or ghost or rumor. But a real, living, breathing Jesus who comes back, not to taunt Pilate or one-up the Sanhedrin or prove to the soldiers who crucified him that he was alive again; but to reconnect with his followers, the ones he loved, the ones who deserted him in his hour of need, to forgive and empower them to continue the work they started.

The power of resurrection is not to be found in the mechanics of how it happened but in the consequences of Christ's new, living presence.

What are the consequences of such a presence in your life? My hunch is that Albert Schweitzer called to be a medical missionary to the darkest reaches of Africa or Mother Teresa searching the gutters of Calcutta for the dead and dying to give them a dignified departure from this life or Martin Luther King, Jr. facing threats and attempts on his life to lead a movement for a day when all people would be valued and treated equally regardless of skin color or economic status – my hunch is they would tell us it was the living, breathing, risen Christ who called them; not a memory or ghost or dream.

What the resurrection means is that when the living presence of Jesus enters a person's life or the life of a congregation, or a church meeting, or the front line of some brave mission – that person or church or meeting or ministry comes to life and is made into something new.

Luke makes a point earlier in the gospel, he says Jesus taught as one with authority. It wasn't his teaching alone or the person alone but *the teachings and the person together* that made things happen; and don't forget got him killed; that same power and threat to the forces of death and power over death beckons you and me after Easter.

The person and message of Jesus cannot be separated. What would happen if a couple stood before the church and vowed in a Service of Christian Marriage to love one another and then, after the wedding, refused to live with one another?

“She knows how I feel about her,” the absentee husband might say. But no. His personal feelings or her memory of him aren’t enough. There must be presence. An absentee husband is no husband at all. Love isn’t really love unless it is expressed by the presence of the lover to the beloved.

The only way to really know someone is to experience that person, to encounter their presence; we don’t really know someone until we’ve spent time with them; until they are bodily present to us. Skype is great, virtual is fine but it’s not the real thing; when Beth Hennessy or I visit someone in the hospital or facing a momentous decision it’s different than if we’d sent a card or email or even called on the phone and said we’re keeping them in our thoughts and prayers. Carol’s deep impulse over these past weeks has been to be physically present to her mother, at her bedside, holding her hand, stroking her forehead.

What we celebrate at Christmas is that the God who spun the whirling planets has become a human being with all the joys and frustrations unique to a physical body.

Now in Easter this incarnation, this God with us continues; Jesus comes back to his followers to say “I’ll never leave you; I will always be with you; perhaps in a different way than before but I will be with you from the darkest valley to the highest mountaintop.”

Every resurrection appearance is initiated by the risen, present Christ. It is his own action – the gift of himself to them. The good news of Easter is that his loving presence and healing activity continue.

A colleague tells the story of a struggling church he served when he was fresh out of Divinity School. They tried everything; brought in facilitators, did training, workshops; nothing was able to turn the church around.

People from the community invited to attend didn’t show up; those visitors who did, didn’t join; the pastor became despondent.

Then one Sunday he came to church and one of the deacons was with a whole group of people. The deacon said, “Look who came to worship with us today!” It was two adults and a gaggle of children. The father said, “You may not remember us but we came to your church a few months ago for help. You were so nice to us. The woman who helped us gave us some food and enough money to get through the week.” The man explained that he lost his job and they were at the end of their rope. He said the nice woman said a prayer with them and sent them on their way. “If it hadn’t been for your church we wouldn’t have made it through that week. We’d given up, till we came here,” he said. Then things got better. The man found a job, he’d been out of town for training but now that he was back the first thing they wanted to do was return to the little church that reached out to them. And on that day, in that place, at that hour the church became something new.

Christ somehow showed up in a kind church member and then again in a grateful family; and that congregation was transformed from a volunteer organization that occasionally did nice things for people in need into nothing less than the very body of Christ.

Not to mention the despondent pastor was revived, given new life. No, life wasn't a bed of roses thereafter, he said, but the risen Christ had taken bodily form and came to stand in their midst and they found new life.

That's what our gratitude in action crucifix points to and reminds us – on each of those slips of paper is a caring Christ-like act of kindness, mercy, healing, or justice – what we are saying is that these are the very physical representations of Christ in the world.

We are asked in Easter to hold two things in juxtaposition: the witness and description of the early church of Christ's physical presence – showing his hands and side, eating fish, breaking bread, speaking in his familiar voice alongside the transformation that was beginning to occur in their lives and communities, their healing and teaching and bringing hope to the broken and lost.

It's hard to explain – a presence as tangible as physical presence but that isn't physical presence. Words and our finite categories fail. What we can trust, however, is the result, the consequence of what the early church became and what the church ever since has accomplished.

Whether we are inspired to follow his teachings because of a memory or because the One who teaches is still with us makes all the difference. Memories fade or buckle in the face of hardship and suffering; active, living relationships thrive and get stronger.

It's not magic; but it is a great mystery; one we need not back away from because it doesn't fit the finite and fixed ways we prefer to think most of the time.

The real presence of the risen Christ who comes to us in our darkest hour or deepest need is a mystery we can welcome and embrace.

It is the reality and promise of Easter. Amen.